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# CROCE VERSUS GENTILE

A DIALOGUE ON CONTEMPORARY  
ITALIAN PHILOSOPHY

PATRICK ROMANELL, Ph. D.  
*Associate Professor of Philosophy, Wells College*

S. F. VANNI  
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*Printed in the United States of America*

*To my students and friends in Panama  
who gave me heart to  
“Fight the good fight”  
of reason*





## CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
FOREWORD	7
I. INTRODUCTION	9
II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	11
III. THE MEANING OF PHILOSOPHY	17
IV. LOGICAL THEORY	22
V. PHILOSOPHY OF ART	40
VI. PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION	53
VII. SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY	71
INDEX OF AUTHORS	73



## FOREWORD

What is perhaps the most instructive and stimulating "episode" in the story of contemporary Italian philosophy is the polemic between Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile. This debate is very instructive because therein is reflected *in nuce* the main questions and answers of pre-war thought in Italy; it is highly stimulating because we can see enacted on the stage of reason the dramatic struggle of two great minds with the basic issues of human experience. The "strife of systems" which characterizes the whole history of ideas, is foreshortened in their unique types of neo-Hegelian idealism to a grand climax.

Polemical writing has been for the last fifty years a peculiar feature of philosophical journalism in Italy. It is often said that the Italian loves to argue. Whether this popular belief is generally true or not, it is particularly true of Croce and Gentile. So much so that Croce holds a brief for the polemical nature of philosophizing itself and affirms: "The critical or negative side is inseparable from philosophy, which is always substantially a *polemic*, as can be seen from the examination of any philosophical writing. Peace-loving people are fond of recommending abstention from polemics and the expression of one's own ideas in a *positive* manner.... Ideas are always armed with helmet and lance, and those who wish to introduce them among men must let them come to grips with each other. A philosopher when he really abstains from polemics and expresses himself as though he were pouring out his own soul, has not even begun to philosophize."

The following dialogue is an attempt to make flesh the above word. We are going to pursue the sound policy of letting the philosophers in question speak for themselves. In order to keep faithful to the actual debate between the two men, we shall quote a good deal from what they have written thereto. However, to avoid the clumsy appearance of reference marks

and footnotes, we have appended a Bibliography of the major sources of the polemic, most of which can be found scattered throughout the pages of Croce's *Critica* and Gentile's *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*.

The aim of this dialogue, of course, is not to settle the dispute between the two Italian thinkers, but rather to exhibit it in all its poignancy. Our work will have served its purpose and not have been written in vain if it reveals somewhat the quintessence of the life of reason itself, whose drama has been so superbly incarnated in the major Platonic dialogues. And as I suggested in a volume on *Gentile*\* several years ago, Gentile is by far the best match for Croce. For in the arena of intellectual contention, the stronger the opponents, the better the fighting.

\* P. Romanell—*Gentile: The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*. New York, S. F. Vanni, 1938.

# I

## INTRODUCTION

CROCE — I am very sorry, Professor Gentile, to announce publicly that your system of philosophy, which you have christened “actualism” or “actual idealism,” does not convince me.

GENTILE — Say rather, Mr. Croce, that the truth does not convince you.

CROCE — There’s the question! I must confess that my judgment pains me in a special way, as you can readily understand, because in my AUTOBIOGRAPHY of 1915 I have credited you for correcting some of my early thought. In addition, I can not forget that we collaborated for some twenty years in the publication of *LA CRITICA*, which since its foundation in 1903 has come to be recognized as a good influence in the awakening of Italian culture. Nevertheless, when I survey recent philosophical trends in Italy, it is hard for me to be optimistic about its achievements.

GENTILE — Why not?

CROCE — Because the “present sterility” of the

second part of our century is, like nature's rhythm of spring and winter, in direct contrast with the fecundity of its first part.

GENTILE — Come, let's not mince words. Don't you really mean that the alleged "sterility" is due to the diffusion of the "actualistic" philosophy, which I systematized after your "FILOSOFIA DELLO SPIRITO"? I am aware that you have already pronounced *ex cathedra* the "dissolution" of actual idealism as a philosophy. Actualism, you believe, has been for some time dead and buried. But this ghost does not leave you and its other critics in peace. Moreover, your change of judgment towards me is "too ostentatious" to be sincere.

CROCE — Please, don't be so naive! Don't you know that the course of life involves the revision of judgments and attachments, a thing sometimes very disturbing? That is why we must sigh with the Poet: "Only thou, o ideal, art true."

GENTILE — Yes; I know too well that the ideal of friendship which we used to share in the good old days, has vanished for us into mere poetry.

CROCE — Enough of this reference to our private affairs. Our readers, after all, are interested in our case in philosophy, not in us as case studies for psychology. "*Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner.*"

GENTILE — Granted. "To err is human; to forgive, divine."

## II

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

CROCE — Before I develop my technical objections to your system, I should like, with your permission, to place it historically.

GENTILE — Do, by all means.

CROCE — There are five major reasons which explain the appeal of actual idealism in contemporary Italian life. The first and foremost of these is that your theory, which was inspired by the Hegelian tradition of Bertrando Spaventa, satisfied the crying need “of melting the hard ice of positivism” in its many varieties near the turn of the present century. Your original crusade against naturalism, especially in the field of pedagogy and the history of philosophy, was certainly effective in banishing the myths that were then believed in respectable circles. But I maintain that its “theoretical function” has now been exhausted, because that mechanical and blind enemy has been vanquished by the force of cosmic spirit. There is nothing, in short, left for your philosophy to do. Hence

its dissolution, in spite of the tinkling of cymbals in academic circles.

GENTILE — My patient efforts in the philosophy of education, as is well known in Italy and outside, reached their fruition in the reform of the Italian schools, one of the grand experiments of Fascism. I consider the so-called Gentile Reform in education one of my dreams come true in Fascist Italy. For this and other reasons, I can not agree with your judgment that actualism is dissolved and ought to close shop, because naturalism to me is the spirit's eternal enemy which must always be combated. "All the philosophies preceding and inferior to the concept of the spirit as pure act," including *your* philosophy, "have been naturalistic." But more of this anon.

CROCE — The second reason for the popularity of your doctrine is that it appeared to be the logical culmination of post-Kantian idealism. This conclusion gave heart, for obviously different ends, to both its exponents and opponents. The success or failure of *actual* idealism spelled the success or failure of *all* idealism. The truth of the matter, as I see it, is that your system is not the most logical form of idealism, but rather its most "simplicist."

GENTILE — From one angle, what I believe is simple, if you understand it, but from another, it is profound.

CROCE — "*Il est profond, car il est creux et il n'y a rien dedans.*"



GENTILE — I regard my view as the “most rigorous form” of modern philosophy because my thesis is that Hegel’s “absolute idealism” failed to be *absolute* on account of its “realistic residue.” The attempt to establish a “method of absolute immanence” constitutes my “reform” of the Hegelian dialectic.

CROCE — Let’s leave Hegel and his reformation in peace for a while, and get back to our story. In the third place, the proposed “actuality of thinking” was not the pure actuality of thought, but the actuality of something beyond reason, *élan vital* or the mere caprice of the moment. This “irrationalistic” tendency of your philosophy made it popular in modern society because it corresponded to the neo-romantic failure of nerve prevalent in the younger generation at the beginning of the century. In short, the “pure” act of thinking was really the “impure” act of blind impulse.

GENTILE — Isn’t it strange how you don’t suspect that the mote in my eyes may be the beam in yours? Your *STORIA D’ITALIA* from 1871 to 1915 is really the history of the author himself. In this “mistaken book” you bestow upon me the honor of the “new irrationalism.” Now, didn’t it ever occur to you that it is *your* philosophy which is irrationalistic?

CROCE — How do you figure that out?

GENTILE — Well then, let us examine for a moment the origin of your so-called “FILOSOFIA DELLO SPIRITO.”

Your early studies on Marx led you to erect an "hiatus" between the theoretical and practical activities of the spirit. This abstract and empirical "distinction" of thought and action was the source of your "irrationalistic philosophy" which was assimilated for support by your Faustian contemporaries near the end of the century. This original element of "activism" from the side of practice veered later to the opposite pole of "intellectualism" from the side of theory. Extremes coincided.

CROCE — Don't you remember that for many years I have defended the thesis that Marxism is not worthy of being called a theory, but is at best a program of political action?

GENTILE — Of course I do. My claim is that, since you did not get to the roots of the malady in Marx's "historical materialism," the disease remains in your system in its more subtle form as the theory of "distincts." You haven't really *aufgehoben* Marx.

CROCE — Before we tackle my theory of "*distinti*," I wish to state the fourth reason for the appeal of your philosophy. Your theory, being the product of a "professor of philosophy," gave hope to students and teachers who yearned to profit in academic life. Especially after the Reform in education was established in the schools of Italy under your Ministry, "philosophers of fashion" hastened to adopt actual idealism as an expedient substitute for intellectual merit. Like Esau of old, they rushed

to sell their intellectual birthright to Jacob for a pottage of comfort. And for young students, actualism supplied an encyclopedia in brief, sparing them the trouble of thinking for themselves.

GENTILE — My answer to your harsh indictment is that I have always rebelled against the “fable of a school” in philosophy. There is no such silly thing as an “actualistic school,” and if some people call themselves my disciples, that is their affair and not mine. The recent “actualistic crisis” among our young intellectuals, which reminds you of the “shirt of Nessus,” is to me a good sign of life. My philosophy, of course, must have its difficulties. If this were not the case, it would be the “most evident sign of its sterility.” Moreover, is the serenity of your library more conducive to philosophizing than the hard knocks of a professor’s school?

CROCE — “One can philosophize anywhere.” But still I prefer my Naples. If you please, let me bring the analysis of the historical background of your position to a close. The fifth and final reason for the appeal of actual idealism is that the “pure act” of thinking, which was advertised as the “master-key” for opening all the locks, possessed the magnetic attraction of both the “sublime” and the “facile.” However, this “pure” act is a pretty poor key because the locks of genuine philosophy are never opened by any single ingenious and magical device. To

summarize, I regard your doctrine as the “last attempt of old theologizing philosophy to make itself a niche in the modern world.”

### III

#### THE MEANING OF PHILOSOPHY

GENTILE — Well, what's wrong with the so-called "theologizing philosophy"?

CROCE — Plenty. There are several objectionable tendencies which reveal the inferiority of philosophy as *metafisica*.

GENTILE — What conception of philosophy do you consider superior?

CROCE — Philosophy as *metodologia*.

GENTILE — Before I criticize your conception of philosophy as methodology, I should like to hear your objections to a "theologizing philosophy."

CROCE — Thank you. Your concept of philosophy as metaphysics smacks of a "religious or mythological origin," because it presumes to solve by revelation, once and for all, the Riddle of the Universe. The various tendencies of this mental attitude are: (1) your defense of a single "fundamental problem," the problem of the theory of knowledge; (2) your rejection of distinctions in favor of unity; (3) your espousal of a "definitive system"; (4)

your posing as a "Buddha"; (5) your restriction of all history to philosophy; (6) your exposition of philosophy as "grandiose architecture." In short, the enumerated tendencies are aspects of a "transcendent" conception of philosophy whose consequence is to "liquidate" all future thought.

GENTILE — My, that's a large order! Taking up the last point first, I do not see the reason for your scorn of "architectonic form." Just a rapid glance at your system will belie this attitude. Your figure of a "Buddha" is too silly to refute. The problem of unity and distinctions will have to be discussed later at length. It is simply false to give anyone the impression that my identification of philosophy with its history should be understood in their traditional way. Finally, with respect to your third point, I agree with your distinction between "system" and "systematisation."

CROCE — If I may interrupt, I am glad we can agree about something. By the way, I am growing impatient about hearing your critique of my view of philosophy.

GENTILE — "The philosopher is a patient animal."

CROCE — All right! I shall listen patiently.

GENTILE — The "quintessence" of your thought is the conception of philosophy as methodology. Do you agree?

CROCE — Yes, the "methodology of history."

GENTILE — Now, your methodological instrument

is the "vestibule" long deserted by the spirit of modern life. Yours is a view of philosophy "with closed doors," because it is shut within and inapplicable to practical experience. Philosophy in your hands becomes a technique alien to life and history.

CROCE — Pardon me, but have I not brought philosophy and life together by the common bond of "coherence"?

GENTILE — To be sure, I too can accept your concept of philosophy as coherence, if it is universal. But yours, by definition, is always particular.

CROCE — How so?

GENTILE — Because all thoughts, whose coherence in life you aspire to make intelligible, are referred by you to a spirit conceived not as the subject of creation, but as an object of contemplation. Hence philosophy as "methodology of history" belongs to dead history because its spirit is dead.

CROCE — Let the dead bury the dead! As for me, I am very much alive to the fact that the function of methodology as the "abstract moment of historiography" is to make possible the best historical knowledge for the guidance of practical life. Besides, to be perfectly honest, I am very disgusted with any doctrine which delivers programs of action out of its "corrupted womb" all at once.

GENTILE — I, on the other hand, am annoyed with

your abortions. Moreover, you are not consistent in your definition of philosophy.

CROCE — What do you mean by that?

GENTILE — At one time you say that philosophy is history, and at another time, the “methodological moment of historiography.”

CROCE — Let me clarify what I mean by the following equation: philosophy = history = historiography = methodology. The distinction I make between historiography and methodology is “merely empirical” and didactic.

GENTILE — Then you don’t identify *res gestae* with *historia rerum gestarum*?

CROCE — Of course not! In my conception of philosophy as methodology, whose task is to analyze the “constitutive categories of historical judgments”, I have always tried to avoid a “confused totality.” Such confusion produces a sterile result, comparable to what would happen if you neutralized the male and female of the species by removing their unique qualities or organs.

GENTILE — On the contrary, the concept of history as “contemporary history”, which you used to defend vigorously with me, implies the very fusion of *res gestae* with *historia rerum gestarum*.

CROCE — Granting that we have reached an impasse in our ideas as to the nature of philosophy, don’t you



realize that your "theologizing" metaphysics is a thing of the past?

GENTILE — Nietzsche used to shout: God is dead! You like to shout: Metaphysics is dead! The truth is that neither God nor metaphysics, properly understood, is dead.

CROCE — Well, what of it?

GENTILE — I consider your criticism of my attitude towards philosophy not really an accusation, but rather its "*autocritica*." Your proposed methodology caricatures the truly serious and religious character of genuine philosophy. Finally, your philosophy of "many problems" belongs to a "mythical" outlook; true philosophy always deals with only one fundamental or "living problem." Better a "theologizing philosophy" than your "mundane philosophy." And what's wrong with talking about the true "God in us"?

CROCE — May God bless us!

## IV

### LOGICAL THEORY

GENTILE — What do you think of my solution to the “fundamental problem” of philosophy?

CROCE — You mean the logical problem of unity?

GENTILE — And why not call it likewise the metaphysical or gnoseological problem of particularity?

CROCE — Will you agree to call it the “problem of the unity-distinction” of spiritual reality?

GENTILE — Yes, if you like. By the way, I suggest that we discuss our respective systems of logic bit by bit, because people who are accustomed to a “*philosophia pigrorum*” will find them hard to digest.

CROCE — Your intricate SISTEMA DI LOGICA COME TEORIA DEL CONOSCERE, like every “theologizing philosophy,” distinguishes surreptitiously and willy-nilly between two kinds of thought, to wit, a “divine thought” and one “merely human.” My critique of your general orientation is based on this distinction, your Achilles’ heel.

GENTILE — Why surreptitiously and willy-nilly?

CROCE — Because your actualistic theory is not only

against abstract distinctions but against every *distinction*. In fact, you consider abstract the very category of “*distinzione*.” Therefore your basic distinction between “act” and “fact” is reintroduced from the back door with a “pistol shot.”

GENTILE — The whole of my SYSTEM OF LOGIC, which reconciles Aristotle and Hegel, categorically refutes this statement. What evidence have you for this conclusion?

CROCE — In your SISTEMA, a remnant of the Spaven-tian “metaphysic of mind”, you disguise the distinction between the logic of ordinary people and the logic of the metaphysician, by clothing it with a new dress.

GENTILE — Pray, to what are you addressing?

CROCE — Simply this: you call the thinking of science and of us poor mortals, “logic of the abstract,” and the other thinking in the philosopher’s superworld, “logic of the concrete.”

GENTILE — Just a quotation at random from one of my books should serve to show you how far you are from the truth: “Philosophy does not have a domain separate from that of the sciences and common knowledge: *nihil a se alienum putat*.”

CROCE — Such quotation verifies my first accusation of your doctrine, namely, panlogism, whose omnivorous jaws of thought swallow everything from soup to nuts. Your interpretation of the Absolute Idea as *Logos* is

derivable from the Hegelianizing Spaventa of the last century, who left a "strong residue" in your thought.

GENTILE — Pardon me, but please let me digest your menu.

CROCE — My thesis is that you construct a "duality of logics", namely, "*logo astratto*" and "*logo concreto*," each of which has its norm or criterion of truth.

GENTILE — If, for the sake of the argument, I accept your untenable thesis, what is the implication?

CROCE — Now, duality has always the "tendency to transcend itself" and leads to unity. In your SYSTEM, it leads to the "devaluation" of the "logic of the abstract" by the "logic of the concrete." Hence panlogism: the tendency to resolve all the other moments or aspects of reality into the form of logical thought: "pure act" or "concrete logos."

GENTILE — Sorry, but I do not regard panlogism an accusation at all, because everybody, whether he knows it or not, is a panlogist. "To philosophize is to panlogize." Panlogism, interpreted correctly as concrete thinking, does not make the world vanish in the idea of the world, as Dr. Johnson charged with stupid alacrity against Bishop Berkeley, but brings it to birth by the light of reason. Panlogism, in brief, is inescapable because thinking is impossible without thinking.

CROCE — This is no valid argument, because it is equally impossible to escape from the rest of experience.

The predicament is not merely logocentric, but psychocentric. Yet the problem of "distinction" still remains unsettled.

GENTILE — Perhaps the rest of our discussion may settle it.

CROCE — That sounds too much like wishful thinking. In any case, the second defect of your logic, which underestimates the "abstract logos," is its tendency towards mysticism. Your mania for the "unity of the spirit," resulting from a weak sense of distinctions, plunges you into reality without truly thinking it, because you fear that thought will make you lose the touch of the Ineffable. "Your pure act, which you call Thinking, could be equally called Life, Feeling, Will, or whatever else, because every denomination, implying a distinction, is here not only inadequate but indifferent."

GENTILE — What, don't you realize that my "*ri-forma*" of the Hegelian dialectic is essentially a critique of its "mystical presupposition"?

CROCE — Your so-called "reform" is really a new form, via the mystical Spaventa, of the old Hegelian method whose fundamental error was the "false application of the dialectical principle" to the sphere of "distincts."

GENTILE — Will you please try to make that mouthful more palatable?

CROCE — As you know, my thesis in the volume on

Hegel is that he confused the dialectic or “synthesis of opposites” with the “nexus of distincts.” You remember that Hegel opened his system with the opposition of being (thesis) and non-being (antithesis), and finished with the opposition of art and religion. These two types of opposition are essentially different, and it is sheer distortion to apply the same technique to both. Hegel’s “mania for triadism” was responsible for his transformation of “distinct” or concrete concepts into “opposite” or abstract concepts. Ironically, the net result was the “night in which all cows are black”, the obscure night of mysticism.

GENTILE — How do you propose to correct his logic?

CROCE — By restricting the old dialectic, which is a unity of opposites, to each “distinct” or “degree” of reality. This restriction avoids the wrong application of the Hegelian method beyond its appropriate domain. Hence a new “dialectic of distinctions and oppositions” characterizes my “absolute spiritualism.”

GENTILE — What on your view would be the relation between, for example, the “distinct” of art and the “distinct” of philosophy?

CROCE — Not the triadic relation of opposites, but the dyadic relation of “double degree”, where what is explicit in one form is implicit in the other.

GENTILE — Sorry, but I do not accept your criticism of Hegel’s SCIENCE OF LOGIC.

CROCE — Why not?

GENTILE — “If there were a nexus of distincts beyond the unity of opposites, the logical law of reason would be double; and in order to preserve the unity of reason, it would be necessary to transcend this duality, either dialectically or with the theory of degrees, by a superior and fundamental unity.” The demand for unity does not permit duality as such.

CROCE — Precisely. The theory of degrees, which respects the “autonomy” of the forms of reality, proposes that the “pure concept”, the true object of logic, is a “unity of distinctions.” The whole of my *LOGICA COME SCIENZA DEL CONCETTO PURO* may be viewed as an answer to what is living and what is dead in the philosophy of Hegel.

GENTILE — Your “pure concept” as “ultra-and-omni representative” is simply a pure abstraction. What you consider living in the philosophy of Hegel is really dead, and what you consider dead is really living.

CROCE — That’s just a smart caricature of the title of my 1907 volume on Hegel!

GENTILE — Since you are a master at that kind of art, I believe I am entitled to take a lesson from you. However, to turn from the ridiculous to the “sublime,” one of those lovely predicates by which you try so hard to explain the demand for my poor “pure act”, I regard your whole *LOGICA* an architectural but mistaken elaboration. Your “unity of distinctions”, as a synthesis of the

“double relation” of opposites and distincts, is a “static” unity. How are you going to make intelligible the “passage” from one form to another?

CROCE — My doctrine of “spiritual circularity” answers your question. The idea of the “circle”, in which form and matter are reciprocally related, is the “true philosophic idea of progress.”

GENTILE — Your “circle” is like a “mad dog” running after its own tail. The only adequate circle is one where the thinking Ego is the center. A circle without a center is inconceivable.

CROCE — That’s just a parody on a geometric metaphor! And is your “circle” without a circumference any more conceivable? Your transcendental Ego is an “ineffable God” in modern dress. That is why I have accused your SISTEMA of mysticism.

GENTILE — My final answer to your charge of mysticism is that actualism, instead of annulling the distinctions of categories, defends the “conservation or better the restoration of an infinite richness of categories, such as no logic and no philosophy has ever conceived.”

CROCE — This “infinite richness of categories” has all the telling earmarks of mystical wonder.

GENTILE — Are you not aware that my problem has been to reconcile the multiplicity with the unity of historical experience?

CROCE — Yes. Since I am conscious of your histor-



ical sense, which you unfortunately have spoiled with an artificial philosophy, I shall qualify your solution as “historical mysticism”, two *insociabilia*.

GENTILE — Will you please clarify this point?

CROCE — “A mysticism which would insist upon particularity and diversity, an *historical mysticism*, in fact, would be a contradiction in terms, for mysticism is unhistorical and anti-historical by its very nature.”

GENTILE — Your analysis is logical enough, but applies beautifully to you rather than to me.

CROCE — How do you justify this rejoinder?

GENTILE — To prove my argument effectively, I propose to show the mystical presupposition of your general mode of philosophizing, and as a corollary, the degeneration of a truly “historical conception” of history into your so-called “absolute historicism.”

CROCE — If you can prove all that, you’re a better man than I am, Gentile.

GENTILE — As I see it, your LOGIC AS THE SCIENCE OF THE PURE CONCEPT is not “philosophical” but rather “empirical”, that is, a contemporary example of the traditional “logic of the abstract”, whose fundamental principle is the law of identity and whose conception of truth transcends the “pure experience” or act of thinking.

CROCE — Your indictment of empiricism is strange to my ears because I have always attacked it.

GENTILE — True; but you have attacked it always with other empirical weapons.

CROCE — What, pray, are you talking about?

GENTILE — Your “philosophy of the four words”: esthetics, logic, economics and ethics.

CROCE — What words to describe my “FILOSOFIA DELLO SPIRITO”!

GENTILE — Your whole thought is empirical because for you everything is “outside of discussion.” Everything is a fact: art, philosophy, economics, morality. All these are immediate or given, but not demonstrated in your system. Yet these facts are very debatable. “Facts, therefore, which are not fact.” The four facts or “distincts” are aspects of a single fact, to wit, spirit, “distributed into four cubby-holes.” Why are there *four* “sacred” categories?

CROCE — There is nothing “sacred” about my four moments, as I have no “philosophic cure” to offer the world. Each category, being universal, is not a number but a quality of experience. The eternal categories do not change; our concepts of them change. However, how do you deduce mysticism from the alleged empiricism of my view?

GENTILE — That is easy. For the primary meaning of mysticism is not the “negation of differences”, which is what you accent, but the “negation of the real activity of the subject.” In other words, mysticism means any

form of objectivism, which presupposes a *quid* outside of us, whatever name is given to this something. The negation of differences is a secondary characteristic of mysticism and is really a consequence of its primary meaning. Strictly speaking, your affirmation of distinctions is inconsistent with your fundamental principle, the objectivity of reality, because that implies a “unity bare of every distinction.” In short, pure mysticism is the “original source or final conclusion of objectivistic systems.”

CROCE — But don't I defend the doctrine that there is nothing outside of the spirit?

GENTILE — True; yet your conception of the spirit is objectivistic, hence naturalistic. To prove my point, let me select the following statement from your *FILOSOFIA DELLA PRATICA*: “Knowledge is knowledge of something; it is the remaking of a fact, an ideal re-creation of a real creation.”

CROCE — What's wrong with that sensible statement?

GENTILE — To propose that real creation, product of will, is the antecedent of ideal re-creation, product of knowledge,<sup>1</sup> is to presuppose in dualistic fashion an object whose reality we may choose to believe on faith but cannot possibly demonstrate.

CROCE — If dualism means nothing more than the “*autodistinzione*” of the spirit into its own forms, then

there is nothing to worry about, because it carries a criticism of metaphysical dualism and all transcendency.

GENTILE — Although I am not convinced by your argument, shall we at least agree about our present disagreement?

CROCE — We should at least do that. I claim that your doctrine leads to mysticism, because it denies concrete diversity.

GENTILE — And I claim that yours leads to mysticism, because it denies concrete unity.

CROCE — Shall we agree also that we are right, at least, about what we affirm?

GENTILE — No.

CROCE — Why not?

GENTILE — Because your affirmation of concrete “distincts” is not logically coherent with your affirmation of concrete unity.

CROCE — Concrete distinction is nothing but concrete unity.

GENTILE — Rather, distinction itself is only concrete or “*attuale*”, if the distincts are abstract or “*inattuali*.”

CROCE — The problem boils down to whether concrete unity should be understood, as I do, in a “mediate” way or, as you crudely do, in an “immediate” one.

GENTILE — How can you achieve the concrete unity of the spirit, if your concept of distinction separates

atomistically the differences which are presupposed as immediate?

CROCE — Your suspicion against the unifying character of distinction arises from confusing it with “separation.” There is a world of difference between separation whose origin is naturalistic and distinction.

GENTILE — Why in the world do you distinguish between distinct concepts and opposite concepts?

CROCE — Because distinct concepts can not be opposite, for the precise reason that they already have opposition in themselves. For example, art is a distinct concept containing the opposition of the beautiful and the ugly. Philosophy is a distinct concept containing the opposition of the true and the false. In brief, art and philosophy are distinct, not opposite.

GENTILE — But how can you make intelligible the concept of spiritual development without a “unity of opposites”, a dynamic *coincidentia oppositorum*?

CROCE — Such coincidence “punctualizes” the the spiritual process in a fixed point. How can you explain the historicity of things by such dialectic? In spite of your lip-service to the contemporary character of history, actual idealism reduces all events or facts to a single “pure act” and reduces all ‘personages to a single “physiognomy or mask.”

GENTILE — The actualistic conception of history is still faithful to the “contemporaneity” of history, a con-

cept which you now call a "metaphor". History to me is the living drama of man, a creation of the transcendental subject, the "profound humanity" in us. Your "circle of distinctions", which encircles the historical process, is but a "painted dialectic." You dogmatically posit history as the antecedent of historiography. This leads to a mechanical or deterministic process which deprives true history of its freedom. Your "absolute historicism" is neither absolute nor historical, because you persist in the classical intuition of objectivism or mysticism. Hence my accusation of historical mysticism, *contradictio in adiecto*.

CROCE — Well, after our long-winded argumentation, I grant you a complete victory....

GENTILE — Oh, really!

CROCE — Yes, over a straw-man.

GENTILE — Thank you for nothing.

CROCE — Something very close at hand bothers me now about your "method of absolute immanence."

GENTILE — What can it be?

CROCE — Its absolute imminence!

GENTILE — What a pun!

CROCE — Would it were just that!

GENTILE — Do you have the nerve to claim it is more than that?

CROCE — In our war of nerves so far, I have neglected to deduce the most serious consequence of your general orientation.

GENTILE — Why so much ado about something?

CROCE — The third and most fatal consequence of your SISTEMA is its tendency towards “phenomenalism or Protagorean historicism.”

GENTILE — How do you reach such a portentous conclusion?

CROCE — Your “devaluation” of the “abstract logos” implies a “depreciation” of the sense of values, because the “pure act” of thinking or “concrete logos”, which remains undifferentiated, is converted into brute fact and “individual caprice.” This “theoretical and ethical indifference” is dangerous both in theory and practice. In theory, it produces an unhealthy tone of scepticism; in practice, an attitude of smug complacency.

GENTILE — Will you agree that the controversy at this point is due to our different conception of the “phenomenology of error and evil?”

CROCE — Exactly.

GENTILE — Then I claim that *your* theory of error and evil leads to phenomenalism in the Protagorean sense, to ethical positivism, to an “equalization of values” and to an acquiescence in brute fact. But before I prove my case, let me hear yours.

CROCE — Your “excessive lust for the concrete” is responsible for the “obliteration of values” in your philosophy.

GENTILE — I deny that with all my heart because a

moral conception of life is based on the "fundamental distinction" between what is and what ought to be.

CROCE — If you please, sir, I am not questioning your heart but your head. If everything as a product of the same act is good, then nothing is good.

GENTILE — What kind of reasoning authorizes you to argue that, since the same activity performs the good and the evil, the consequence is that there is no distinction between them? The problem is not whether there is or is not a distinction between values and disvalues, but how to make such distinction intelligible. If the two contrasting terms of value are made external to each other, then the distinction is unintelligible.

CROCE — But my claim is that you reduce the two poles of the relation to one. Do you not defend the idea that what comes to be judged later in life as error and evil was previously believed to be true and good?

GENTILE — Yes. "The evil which is combated is not the one which is committed."

CROCE — What has belief to do with thought? To believe something is true or good is not the same as to think it so. "To believe oneself to be rich does not signify to be rich."

GENTILE — *Truly* to believe oneself to be rich *does* signify to be rich.

CROCE — Admitting the inconceivability of error and evil as positive acts, you add that they, outside of the



process that corrects them, are true. You resort to the "chronological distinction" between past and present in order to differentiate between error and truth, good and evil. In other words, error is past truth and evil, past morality. If I have understood your view correctly, would error and evil be the event of the year before, the day before, the minute before?

GENTILE — I am sorry, but you have misunderstood me again *this* minute, because my distinction between past and present is definitely a logical one, to which empirical time is irrelevant.

CROCE — Your concept of "logical past" is nothing but a confused distinction between one aspect of the spirit and another. Error is not, as you believe, past thought, but what is not thought at all, an act of life which satisfies the illusion of possessing the truth. In other words, error belongs to the economy of life. Evidence for my theory of the economic character of error, which has its classical precedents, is the fact that practical motives are used to "justify errors", not truth. Hence pragmatism is a true theory of error but a false theory of truth. And what we call moral evil is outside of moral consciousness, not immoral but "amoral", because it is the "economic, utilitarian, emotional form of the spirit" which in order to be denied by the moral life must first be posited.

GENTILE — You certainly gave me a mouthful there to swallow, but still I find it indigestible. You complain

that my theory "attenuates" error and evil to a vanishing point. Are you under the fond illusion that yours fares any better? For consider the matter of error closely. You say that error satisfies man in an economic sense. Thus the sting of error requisite for the spiritual life disappears. Error in your system is too good to be true; it lacks the taint of that "original sin" from which we must ever redeem ourselves in this tragic life of ours. If error is useful in life, why should we discourage its happening? This paradoxical situation would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the question of evil. Nor finally is the substitution of the useful for the true and the good of any avail, "just as water is of no help to him who is hungry and not thirsty."

CROCE — I think water would be of great help to us right now to quench our thirst for loquacity. Since we have reached the great impasse of our philosophies, I suggest that we summarize our critiques in the field of logic. Have you any more accusation to hurl against my LOGICA?

GENTILE — Not exactly an accusation, but an historical blunder. In your third indictment, you made a reference to my so-called "Protagorean historicism." In fact, Protagoras, the solipsist of the ancient world, is at the "antipodes from actualism" because his conception of man is not the measure of all things. If you permit me a final word, your conception of history may well be

called Protagorean, since history viewed from the outside is "all of one single color." It is what it is.

CROCE — It is always the same old story with you. You repeat and repeat your argument like the gossip of an old maid.

To summarize the foregoing polemic on logic, I have made three connected charges against your theory: panlogism, mysticism and phenomenalism. I came to this conclusion by using the dialectical method of polarity, in which the poles are "distincts."

GENTILE — And I, accepting the first charge as a sound doctrine, have accused your theory of the other two. I reached this conclusion by means of a genuine dialectic, where the poles are "opposites."

## V.

### PHILOSOPHY OF ART

CROCE — Will you grant that our arguments against each other's views in the remaining forms of "*lo spirito*" follow from the general critique of our respective logics?

GENTILE — Of course.

CROCE — Let me turn first to art, the "subjective moment" in your actualistic system. There are three main difficulties I find with your theory of art. In the first place, your early definition of art as the "philosophy of the artist" suffers from the fallacy of a vicious circle:  $a = ba = bba = bbba$ , etc. To utter, "Art is the philosophy of the artist", is just as profound and substantial as to argue: "Cooking is the philosophy of the cook."

GENTILE — What babble you're cooking up! What I meant by that first definition of mine is that an artist expresses his own feeling or state of his soul as "colored by a certain dominant thought." How can you deny that?

CROCE — Your theory is, at bottom, a return to the false Hegelian view of art as *philosophia inferior*, against which Francesco De Sanctis defended the true concept of

art as a "non-conceptual form." Is art putting feeling into "logical forms"?

GENTILE — The logic of art is obviously not the same as the logic of philosophy. "The philosophy of poets disappears in their very souls; the soul of philosophers disappears instead in their philosophy." Hence, "beauty is truth", that is, the truth of art; truth is beauty, the beauty of philosophy. Furthermore, are you not aware that in my recent analysis of art I have developed the distinction between "pure art" and a "work of art"? Pure art, the "essence" of a work of art, is "*sentimento*."

CROCE — This is patently erroneous because art is not identical with feeling, but is its "expression" or "intuition."

GENTILE — You fail miserably to understand my dialectical or perspectival analysis of the spirit's forms. Since spirit is "actually" one, its multiple forms can not constitute its separable elements but rather its perspectives or *aspects*. The nature of the dialectical method involves the search for the "transcendental" factors which make experience intelligible. The elaboration of the distinguishable adjectives immanent to the whole of reality serves to punctuate the various ways of looking at the world. Applying this type of analysis specifically to the realm of art, "pure art" as the "subjective moment" is the "whole of the spirit from the aspect of art." Now art in the concrete is more than "the artistic" or "pure art," the

“essence” of a work of art. In other words, the essence and existence of art are not identical. This does not mean that pure art is non-existent. What it means precisely is that the artistic quality of experience exists only within the totality of the spiritual process. Pure art possesses, strictly speaking, the status of *persistence*, rather than *existence*. Therefore, in answer to your last argument, art *in the concrete* is, to be sure, the expression of feeling, but art *in the abstract* is just “pure feeling.” For, to repeat, a “work of art” is more than “pure art.” There is in a work of art an “objective truth” or content integrated with its “tone of expression.” But in art *sub specie artis*, we pay attention to the tonality or subjectivity of the human spirit.

CROCE — What your particular brand of dialectical or perspectival analysis fails to see is that what may not exist in one field of the spirit, may exist in another. For example, feeling does not exist as such in the realm of art, but it does exist as the “practical aspect” of life. In any case, how can pure feeling be the essence of art? Isn’t feeling (desires, passions, aspirations, volitions) just “matter” for artistic form in the “circle” of the spirit?

GENTILE — On the contrary, I regard the unique feeling which permeates a work of art as its “form” or essence. Esthetic form, in my eyes, is not the objective element which organizes the matter or content of a work of art, but the subjective element which vitalizes it. Esthetic

form is the “pure form” abstracted ideally from the work of art or “concrete form.” The latter is a synthesis of abstract form and abstract content. In short, the essence of art lies in its abstract form, “*puro sentimento*”, distinguishable residue of its concrete form.

CROCE — Since this “pure sentiment” is pure sentimentalism on your part, I shall quickly pass to the second difficulty of your philosophy of art. Your conception of artistic education as “education eminently egoistic” flies in the face of common sense because art is well recognized as a civilizing force.

GENTILE — An appeal to common sense is quite often an appeal to nonsense. Moreover, when I characterize the artist as “egoistic” or “lawless”, I am referring to the context of art as such or “pure art”, the subjective or artistic quality of experience, which does not “actually” exist *per se*, but persists in “actuality” as a phase of all experience. I am therefore not referring to art in the concrete because the real artist in life always tames more or less his persistent lawlessness by objectifying his emotional energy into what is called a work of art. The artist may lack another’s criticism, but not his own “self-criticism.” In short, artistic education considered abstractly is subjectivistic or egoistic, but considered concretely, is moralizing.

CROCE — Your artificial shifting from the abstract to the concrete standpoint, and vice versa, leads to the

third and final difficulty of your esthetic analysis. Your view leads to a "radical negation" of art because it is identified in the concrete with criticism and thought. The tendency to identify art with the criticism of art is a confusion of domains. The elimination of the "autonomy" of art shakes the very foundation of literary and artistic criticism. The function of literary criticism is to make intelligible the distinction between poetry and prose. Any theory which fails to do so is not only false; it is useless and empty of determination. To explain everything in terms of an "indistinguishable act" is to explain nothing in particular. To be more specific, this fatal consequence is implicit in your identification of reading and translating.

GENTILE — If I may interrupt, my thesis of the identity of reading and translating signifies the impossibility of conceiving a work of art as a *Ding-an-sich*. The literary critic in reading a poem must translate it into his own language in order to interpret it. He cannot take it straight like whiskey.

CROCE — He who translates in reading has not learned yet to read well. This radical confusion leads to esthetic phenomenalism, the failure to distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly. The failure to make intelligible the esthetic contrasts of experience is a logical result of the very principle of actualism, in which distinguishable components are hopelessly confused.



GENTILE — In the first place, beauty and ugliness are discriminated by the quality of feeling, not by the quality of expression. The beautiful is characterized by whole-hearted and sincere feelings; the ugly, by artificial and “superficial feelings.” In the second place, literary criticism is not an affair of “chemical analyses” directed to distinguishing in the same poem what is poetry and what is non-poetry, as if the two elements could really be separated. And in the third place, if by phenomenalism is meant not the individualistic conception of a Protagoras, but the transcendence of what Spaventa used to call “*l'ontismo*”, then I do not hesitate for a moment to profess myself a “convinced phenomenalist.” But since this is old stuff, let me pass more directly to a critique of your philosophy of art.

CROCE — I shall be prepared for the worst.

GENTILE — Your famous *ESTETICA*, like the rest of your “*FILOSOFIA DELLO SPIRITO*”, is constructed completely on an empirical basis, where everything is considered an undebatable matter of facts.

CROCE — I must confess it is difficult for me to understand, on purely intellectual grounds, your harsh attitude towards my *ESTETICA*. Didn't you admit in your review of its first edition in 1902 that you adhered to my stand? Why the sudden change in your *FILOSOFIA DELL'ARTE*, published in 1931?

GENTILE — I must also confess since it's good for

the soul, that at the beginning of my intellectual life I too was guilty of your "great speculative error" which had infected your *ESTETICA*, to wit, the Aristotelian conception of individuality as "particularity." My intense reflection on the problem of education saved me from this original sin of yours.

CROCE — Impossible because my whole philosophy is based on the modern idea that the true individual is the "concrete universal." And don't you realize that I have corrected my first edition of the *ESTETICA* by clarifying the moment of individuality as really the intuitive moment of the "immediate union of the individual and the universal" which thought alone can mediate?

GENTILE — I realize that you feel strongly the immanence of everything within the determinate individual, but this legitimate feeling does not receive a "coherent interpretation" in your system. Your concept of the "concrete universal" as the relation of the universal and the individual is a static relation, and therefore "*adialettica*." In spite of your forementioned correction, you still insist on the old doctrine of "distincts." Moreover, with respect to your recent correction, the "immediate union" of the individual and the universal is inconceivable because they as such are already immediate; hence the only unification possible must be mediate. Let me connect this analysis to your theory of art. According to you, it is a fact that art is a form of knowledge. I deny this fact because art

in itself does not instruct and does not “extend the domain of our knowledge.” That is why art has been compared with a dream. For the artist as such, in the words of Calderón, “*la vida es sueño*.” Furthermore, you qualify the kind of knowledge art is supposed to offer by the predicates of “intuitive” or “immediate.” And this leads me to your conception of intuition which suffers from two important defects. First, immediate knowledge is a contradiction in terms, since knowledge without judgment is impossible. How do you know that in intuition there is not a “ray” of light which shines in the concept?

CROCE — Then you would not discriminate between art and thought?

GENTILE — Of course. However, the distinction between them is not, so to speak, “perpendicular” with respect to the plane of reality but “transversal.”

CROCE — Your geometry of the spirit reminds me of the “circular” relation I defend. What is the second alleged defect of my doctrine of intuition?

GENTILE — Intuition must be related to something. Intuition of *what*?

CROCE — Intuition of *feeling*: hence the “lyrical character” of art.

GENTILE — But what makes an artist an artist is precisely his unique feeling, that “*nescio quid*” divine power which pervades his work of art, rather than the intuition or expression of feeling.

CROCE — Strange as it may seem, you ignore something “so elementary and fundamental”, namely, the distinction between feeling or “passion” and intuition or expression.

GENTILE — The nature of feeling, if you please, is not what is usually defined an “obscure passional tumult” which must be calmed by intuition, but the very “activity of the subject bursting forth” with infinite energy. I may remark in passing that the concept of “*sentimento*” has been from the time of the Socratic Schools the “*crux philosophorum.*” Turning now to your general effort in the field of esthetics, am I correct in stating that your aim has been to develop via our nineteenth-century critic, De Sanctis, an “ESTETICA DELLA FORMA”?

CROCE — Exactly.

GENTILE — Good intentions, but poor execution. For on your view, the content of art which is derived from the domain of feeling, can not possibly be resolved into concrete form because feeling has its own “existence” as the “practical aspect” of the spirit, more precisely, as the economic aspect of life. The only way of achieving the proposed “resolution” is by the “*inattualità*” of feeling. Your way is not a return to our great De Sanctis because it is not a “conversion” of content into form but an “appendage” of the latter to the former.

CROCE — Then feeling does not exist for you?

GENTILE — Feeling as immediate does not *exist*,

but *persists* within the mediate process of all experience, whether artistic or otherwise. Your failure to reach an esthetic formalism makes you conceive art “dualistically.” In short, your philosophy of art ends with a “content-esthetics”, even though you wanted from the very beginning to construct a “form-esthetics.”

CROCE — The artistic process, as I see it, is not the immediacy of feeling or content but the mediation of “feeling and image” by means of intuition or form. Your concept of art oscillates from the extreme of classicism in the doctrine of “philosophy of the artist”, which is the esthetic analogue of panlogism in logic, to the opposite extreme of romanticism in the doctrine of “*sentimento*,” which is the esthetic analogue of mysticism. Extremes coincide. In contrast, my “Esthetic of intuition” is a reconciliation of the two opposed schools, *Gehaltsesthetik* and *Formaesthetik*. By the way, have you any more arguments to present against my philosophy of art?

GENTILE — Yes, I wish to criticize two special doctrines of your ESTETICA. One is concerned with the problem of technique; the other with the theory of artistic and literary *genres*. Isn’t technique for you the means (sound, color, etc.) used by the artist to translate his intuitions or “internal expressions” into “external expressions”?

CROCE — Precisely. The media of art serve as “aids to memory” and “physical stimulants for reproduction.”

GENTILE — Now you believe that technique is

“extrinsic” to the artistic activity which you define as an “expression of impressions.” According to your view, the Mona Lisa was artistically painted in Da Vinci’s “*fantasia*” before it was practically painted on canvas. On the other hand, I contend that the artist does not use technique to externalize his fancy but to create it into a work of art. “Nothing of the spirit is ever externalized because there is nothing conceivable outside of it.”

CROCE — The fallacy of your argument rests on the substitution of your own concept of intuition as feeling for mine. To say that technique as a practical activity is an externalization of artistic activity does not mean that it lies outside of the spirit itself. All is spirit but all is not art. And finally, your own view of technique as the “presupposition” or “antecedent” of art is erroneous because technique, like all practical activity, follows rather than precedes art, the “first moment” of theoretical activity.

GENTILE — The question of technique is connected with the second criticism I wish to make. In my eyes technique refers to the “multiplicity of the arts” (music, etc.). Many arts, therefore many techniques, but art *one* in its essential character of “fundamental feeling.” The concept of content is “equivalent” to the concept of technique, although the opposite generally seems to be regarded as the case.

CROCE — If I may be abrupt, will you please get to the point at issue?

GENTILE — Well, you believe that any attempt at a classification of the arts is “groundless.”

CROCE — Isn't it, esthetically speaking?

GENTILE — In the first place, your attitude towards esthetic classes as “*concetti pseudoestetici*” is incoherent with your interpretation of the “lyrical character” of art. Isn't “lyrical” a literary kind?

CROCE — Oh, what kind of misunderstanding! I have said so many times that the word “*lirica*”, outside of its polemical and declarative values, indicating the passional genesis of organic imagination, is “redundant”; it is one of the synonyms for “*intuizione*.”

GENTILE — And in the second place, there is nothing “peculiarly illegitimate in the theory of literary kinds” because thought can not function without concepts, in spite of the fact that its task is to preserve an “essential elasticity” towards them. Moreover, contrary to your wishes, you have been forced by the practical necessity of historiography “to readmit the proscribed literary classes with all the honors.”

CROCE — I deny this change because my polemic against the theory of literary classes has continued to this day. Moreover, I have always admitted that all “psychological concepts” (the comic, tragic, epic, etc.), in so far

as they constitute the material of life, can become the object of artistic representation. And I have always granted their “utility” in the history of literature.



## VI

### PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

GENTILE — Shall we agree that by science in this context we mean abstract science, the positive and mathematical disciplines?

CROCE — In contrast, philosophy is true or concrete science.

GENTILE — Am I correct in stating that a reaction against nineteenth-century positivism and "*scientismo*" is the common origin of our thought?

CROCE — This common origin gives us a common point on the negative side of the question. However, from the positive side, your conception of science does not convince me.

GENTILE — What is wrong with it?

CROCE — Don't you now put both science and religion in the same moment of the spirit?

GENTILE — Science is the "relative" objective moment and religion, the "absolute" objective moment.

CROCE — Then science and religion are essentially identical as objective in character. Now you define relig-

ion as “mystical.” Therefore science must be mystical also. I must confess that this is too much to believe.

GENTILE — Is not the scientific attitude towards Nature the same as the religious attitude towards God?

CROCE — Before I criticize your view of religion, I should like to get your reaction to my idea of the sciences as “pseudo-concepts.”

GENTILE — A consideration of the historical origin of your theory of science is sufficient to show its “inadmissibility” in a genuine idealism. For your theory of “*pseudoconcetti*” was suggested by the “gnoseology of the natural sciences.”

CROCE — Following the “fictionalistic” lead of the school of empiriocriticism which recognized the practical or economic character of the sciences, I have arrived at the conclusion that science is the universe looked at completely “*sub specie schematismi et abstractionis*.” This pragmatic interpretation of science implies its theoretical weakness. Hence your argument is irrelevant.

GENTILE — Shall we at least concur in the idea that religion and “myth” coincide?

CROCE — But you spoil it all by adding that religion is “mysticism.”

GENTILE — Your statement is not exact. The “essence” of religion or “pure religion” is mystical in character. The “sense of otherness” is the root of the

religious attitude towards the Unknown, the "*Deus absconditus*."

CROCE — I have my doubts about the identification of religion and mysticism because the latter is "repugnant" to the former, as theology recognizes.

GENTILE — Again you fail to be aware of my dialectical method or perspectival analysis of the forms of spirit. *Sub specie religionis* or abstractly, religion is mysticism. But concretely or historically, religion is more than the religious quality of self-denial. After all, the God of St. Augustine is *St. Augustine's* God. The altars before which man kneels are those which he himself raises. In other words, the difference between religion and philosophy is sharp only on an "ideal" or logical level of discourse. In the concrete, the difference is "more in the accent than in the content" of what they say. In the context of history, the activity of the religionist and the philosopher is moral in character because each develops the personality of man. For "human life in its fulness" is "truly morality."

CROCE — As to the relation between philosophy and religion, I contend that philosophy when it attacks religion as "mythological form" does not deny it as faith and "religiosity." Turning now from the theoretical to the practical side of religion, as you doubtless know, I have been fighting ecclesiasticism for many years.

GENTILE — Barking dogs don't bite, especially when

they are papists in disguise. For how in the world is your alleged anticlericalism consistent with your "unforeseen alliance" with the papal Encyclical of 1926 which implies that the only possible State is the Church? This "Catholizing" tendency is not a logical development of your philosophy; it is a "transfer" of the practical point of view to the field of theory.

CROCE — At that time the so-called "alliance" with Pope Pius XI took the shape of a common attack against that political conception which makes the State the end and the individual, the means. What is so "unforeseen" about that attack on my part? Doesn't the history of civilization prove that the ethical point of view of the Church is superior to the economic point of view of the political State?

GENTILE — This is a *petitio principii* based on an erroneous conception of politics. However, let us finish our polemic on religion before we go to our philosophy of conduct.

CROCE — I should like to make a final observation. It is acknowledged that the right wing of your actualistic school has recently joined the Catholic Church. This phenomenon of conversion fits in with the "theological tone" of your philosophy.

GENTILE — Since there is no need to justify the winged ways of a non-existent school of philosophy, I hereby declare that the logical outcome of your "empirical"

spiritualism is “essentially atheistic”, a consequence of its “naive realism and intellectualism”. As to the religious implication of my own thought, I personally am convinced that “Christianity is actual idealism and vice versa.” And Christianity is Catholicism purified of its dogmatism.

## VII

### SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

CROCE — Are you ready to discuss the practical consequences of our thought?

GENTILE — Ready is too mild a word for the way I feel about your so-called “FILOSOFIA DELLA PRATICA.”

CROCE — The fundamental error of actualism in the social field as a whole is its “immediate unity” of theory and practice, knowledge and will, thought and action, philosophy and politics. This position which goes against the grain of all common sense has unfortunately not been just “academic chatter” in the reformed schools of Fascist Italy.

GENTILE — Indeed! What else can the verbiage of a “professor of philosophy” be?

CROCE — Your doctrine reflects a moral disease particularly acute in our times, namely, the indifference to truth and the irreverence to the ideal. Your practical indifference to what is theoretically different, I regret to say, is a grave sign of the abnormal conditions rampant in our world. And your “identification of a political

party with morality and science" makes intelligible your whole philosophy of culture.

GENTILE — You sound like a voice in the wilderness. Have you proved that thought and action are distinct activities of life? Of course not; your common sense tells you all this is a fact.

CROCE — I have a "meticulous respect for facts," properly interpreted.

GENTILE — Your artificial and "empirical distinction" between theory and practice is not fact but fiction. Are you willing to listen to my four objections to it?

CROCE — Your reaction will give you away as sure as I am alive.

GENTILE — The first difficulty is that if the spirit has two forms, then each of them conditions the other. Hence spirit is not free and will never be able to do a thing.

CROCE — My doctrine of "spiritual circularity" takes care of your first objection. The relation between will and intellect is not a linear connection of cause and effect but a reciprocal "relationship of form and matter."

GENTILE — The second difficulty concerns the impossibility of attributing any "solidity" whatever to knowing when it is opposed to doing. If knowledge and will are products of the same spirit, then they are the same thing. Any distinction thereby is superfluous.

CROCE — This is like arguing that if seeing and

eating are products of the same organism, then they are the same thing.

GENTILE — As to the third difficulty, to speak of a “theoretical activity” is logically absurd because the two are contradictory terms.

CROCE — That’s pure “sophistry”! The fact that thought is active in the sense that knowledge is not a passive copy of reality, does not mean that it is identical with the activity of will.

GENTILE — The fourth and final difficulty is that such distinction leads to “*apoliticismo*”, the conception of a philosopher-king in an ivory-tower. The philosopher must participate in political life if he is to develop a sound theory of politics. If politics and morals were separable from philosophy, how could you attribute to the philosopher any social responsibility? In short, the consequence of your view is sheer intellectualism in the bad sense.

CROCE — On the contrary, your “philosophic politicalism” is a bad mixture of categories. What I defend is not “*apoliticismo*”, which is total apathy, but “*simpoliticismo*”, that is, a sympathetic interest in politics as well as in all other phases of human life. “A thinker who does not feel his problem, who does not live his thought, is not a thinker; he is a mere elocutionist, repeating thoughts that have been worked out by others.” Nevertheless, the philosopher of politics must guard himself from every



political tendency, if he wishes to proffer a comprehensive analysis, rather than a "*filosofia tendenziosa*." Isn't it strange that after so many years of effort on my part to banish the "pure philosopher" from the clouds, you relegate me to an ivory tower? In any case, better a "pure" philosopher than an "impure" politician! And isn't it odd too that your convicting me for "abstention and indifference" in the practical world is made in terms of a theory which preaches the empty and fatuous verbalism of the "unity" of the human spirit?

GENTILE — Since repetition in a philosophic polemic is "bad taste", I shall pass to my critique of your philosophy of economics which you regard as the "amoral" or "pre-moral" aspect of practical life.

CROCE — I consider the spiritual category of "*economicità*" the "redemption of a condemned concept" in the history of ethics. The economical to me means the useful, not the egoistic aspect of life. Hence my "*FILOSOFIA DELLO SPIRITO*" is a "quaternity" which adds the useful to the traditional trinity of the beautiful, the true and the good. The concept of economic activity as an "autonomous" form of the spirit I suggested for the first time in my early studies on Marx published in 1898.

GENTILE — I must confess that your "discovery of the economic principle", which was inspired by the Machiavellian conception of our De Sanctis, is ingenious but it is likewise ingenuous.

CROCE — Thank you for the genteel compliment, Mr. Gentile.

GENTILE — Your conception of the economic side of life leads to the way of the cross, Mr. Croce.

CROCE — Oh, what there is in a blessed name!

GENTILE — Your distinction of the economic form of experience is based on a dead or “mechanical concept of the universal” in the realm of action. Such absurd distinction is an inevitable consequence of your naive realism. To define the economic form of will as “individual will” is to put together two contradictory terms. In concrete reality, there is never an economic act which is not ethical, for means and ends are unified in the moral process of life.

CROCE — The relation between the two terms of the practical is not static but dialectical. Practical life, as I see it, is a “dialectic” of the economic and the ethical moments, in which there takes place the perpetual “resolution” of the former into the latter.

GENTILE — You can’t have your cake of “dialectic” and keep it “distinct”!

CROCE — That’s an old recipe!

GENTILE — Is the economic or useful a spiritual category? Let’s see. A category is a unity of opposites, synthesis *a priori*: dialectic. For example, beautiful and ugly, true and false, good and evil: sets of terms which are contradictory and therefore exclude middle terms.

Now then, the same contradictory opposition does not exist between the useful and the harmful, the two contraries of economicity, for there is a middle term between them, to wit, the useless.

CROCE — That's useless hair-splitting! To employ the immortal characters of Cervantes, Sancho Panza is as much a manifestation of man as Don Quijote. Your "actualistic economics", announcing the "marriage" of the science of economics with philosophy, can be caricatured by the following pair of syllogisms:

*"Every scientist as man, must be a philosopher.  
Economics is the work of the scientist.  
Therefore, economics is philosophy."*

This is like arguing:

*"A body is necessary to be a philosopher.  
The stomach is part of the body.  
Therefore, the stomach is philosophy."*

GENTILE — That's harmless stomach-splitting! My proposal to provide for economic theory a philosophic foundation was aimed at correcting it of its abstractness and anti-historical character.

CROCE — What you fail to understand is that "economics does not change its nature," whatever may be the

historical conditions, in the same way that arithmetic does not change its nature with the thing enumerated.

GENTILE — “*Qui incipit numerare, incipit errare.*”

CROCE — The absence of the utilitarian aspect of reality in your system implies the nonsensical conclusion that the economic moment is the “moment of evil.” In my 1907 essay, RIDUZIONE DELLA FILOSOFIA DEL DIRITTO ALLA FILOSOFIA DELL'ECONOMIA, I attempted to prove that juridical and economic activity are really “synonyms.” In other words, utility or law as such cannot be evil because its amorality is prior to good and evil.

GENTILE — This is no proof but an *ipse dixit*. Now if you consider the identity of utility and evil in the profound way of “dialecticism”, rather than in the superficial way of empiricism, the whole thing will become comprehensible.

CROCE — To be deep is to be narrow.

GENTILE — And to be broad is to be shallow... Moral will is articulated by two aspects which persist within its dialectic, namely, the subjective moment of economy or “interest” and the objective one of law. Ideally or abstractly speaking, utility and law are not identical but opposite. To use a classic figure, the moral process is like the drama of the Prodigal Son. Man as subject becomes moral through being toned down by the objective order of law, state and society.

CROCE — Your dialectic is to me an unintelligible

dialect. If I were to interpret that parable of the Bible, I would say it teaches that the prodigal is identical with the wasteful, the economic disvalue, against which law emerges to remove the tragedy of waste.

GENTILE — The reduction of law to economy is intimately connected with your conception of the State which is “perhaps more Marxian than Hegelian.”

CROCE — Will you please expand that historical reference?

GENTILE — With pleasure. For both Hegel and Marx, the State is power. But for Hegel, this power is ethical; whereas for Marx who substitutes the concept of Class for State, it is “economic power or power without adjective.” Now your doctrine of the State as an “abstract economic organization” does not illuminate what the State really is in history, namely, a dynamic “ethical substance.” As a matter of fact, you belie your own conclusion when you argue that liberalism is “adverse to the communistic ideal of the abolition of the State”. This aversion would be inconceivable if the State were merely what you call a “simple abstraction.”

CROCE — The conceptions of the “merely political” or economic State and that of the moral State are both true when related dialectically. Their relation is not a “parallelistic duality” but the “resolution” of the former into the latter. Morality, the universal moment of the good,

in transcending power, the individual moment of the useful, preserves utility by denying it.

GENTILE — My, how your “resolution” wins a very easy victory over an “imaginary enemy”! The real State in history does not have its ethical critics outside of its pale, for it gives birth from within itself to revolution, out of which comes not the annihilation of government but its dynamic realization. The concrete State is, in short, the “ethical State.”

CROCE — Since you refuse to be convinced of my “resolution”, I shall next demur to the tenets of your theory of the “*Stato etico*” which to me is an exaggerated form of the Hegelian doctrine, whose “unctuous preachers” conceive the State as a sort of “personified abstraction” comparable to a tribal God.

GENTILE — Don’t you realize that the doctrine of the “ethical State” constitutes my “new liberalism”?

CROCE — That’s a new name for an old way of behaving which is “authoritarian” and “reactionary.”

GENTILE — A government without authority is no government at all, is it?

CROCE — Granted; but the fact that the authority of the rulers and the consent of the ruled are inseparable, does not specify that a determinate government actually has the consent of its citizens. To *impose* authority at any cost is to *dispose* of common consent.

GENTILE — And if by “*reazionarismo*” you mean a

reaction to the "old liberalism" which is based on an empirical conception of freedom (democratic, individualistic, atomistic, anarchistic, *laissez-faire*), then you may call me reactionary, if you wish.

CROCE — Reactions are always a sure sign of crisis and sickness; whereas liberalism as the *via media* is a token of sanity and normality.

GENTILE — Reactions are necessary in life, aren't they?

CROCE — Yes, up to a certain point only.

GENTILE — The liberalism which I defend is the "liberalism of freedom within law, and therefore within the strong State and the State conceived as an ethical reality."

CROCE — Your so-called "new liberalism" or doctrine of the "ethical state", which covers a multitude of sins, suffers from three generalities.

GENTILE — Pray, what is the first?

CROCE — "True freedom exists within law." This proposition is not philosophically exact. Since freedom is the essence of the human spirit, law is made for man and not man for law. Laws used by man as an instrument of justice are subject to modification and overthrow. The second proposition: "The State must be strong." This is not a philosophical statement because the concepts of "strong" and "weak" are alien to philosophy. It is sheer "sophistry" to argue that because force in things human

is spiritual in character, particular "modes of force" are automatically spiritual. And finally, the third proposition: "The State must be an ethical State." This generalization is deficient. For the State as such, prior to its "resolution" into morality, is a "simple abstraction" to which the categories of good and evil are irrelevant.

GENTILE — You give my liberal conception of the State the name of a "governmental conception" of morality. But calling names does not settle arguments. Although I have always denied that Fascism is a "catechism" of rules and have disclaimed that I speak as its "authorized interpreter", I am firmly convinced that the three foregoing propositions constitute its "differential principles." I do not see why they suffer from generality or anti-historicism. To affirm that true liberty is to be found within the scope of law is to deny that it exists outside and therefore against law, which is the way of rugged individualism. Fascism, it is true, does not defend the "freedom of the individual, but that of the State", without which there is no freedom at all for anyone. Nevertheless, it is sheer misunderstanding to infer a "*filosofia statolatrica*" from this doctrine, because Fascism does not absorb and squash the individual within the State, but respects the individual as a moral and religious personality. It is said that Fascism is "totalitarian." This means to me that it is not "lay" but "religious" in character. "It is intolerant in the same sense as every religious faith."



And in rejecting the “anarchistic liberalism of the individualist” who selfishly looks at the State as a passive policeman with a small stick, the “authoritarian State” is “more liberal” than your miscalled “*Stato liberale*.”

CROCE — Liberal *is*, as liberal *does*.

GENTILE — If you don't mind, I should like to close this endless polemic of ours since 1913, with something of a surprise which doubtless you will vociferously deny.

CROCE — What in the world can it be?

GENTILE — You're a “pure Fascist without a black shirt”!

CROCE — Surprise is not the word for it!

GENTILE — Your recent espousal of “democratic liberalism” is in “sharp contrast” with all the political ideas, inherited from Vico and Hegel, which you previously defended.

CROCE — Just a moment before you surprise me any further. In my eyes, liberalism is an ethical conception of life. The liberal ideal is a moral ideal. Liberalism is by its very nature “metapolitical.” “*Liberalismo*” (“moral liberalism”) should not be confused with “*liberismo*” (free-trade or “economic liberalism”). Liberalism, the criterion of social life, can flourish historically under various types of economic arrangements, such as capitalism and socialism. In other words, economic or political democracy is a possible combination with liberalism. But ethical democracy is an impossible combination because

liberalism proper is "anti-egalitarian" or truly aristocratic. Therefore, ethically speaking, "democratic liberalism" is a contradiction in terms.

GENTILE — So much more proof for my thesis that the whole substance of your thought, *malgré* the external appearances to the contrary, is "perfectly Fascist."

CROCE — What evidence have you for these unwarranted "praises" bestowed upon me as the alleged precursor of the Fascist State?

GENTILE — Your sympathies for Marx and Sorel, your antipathy to the democratic mentality of the Masons—all these constitute part of the noble heritage of Fascism. You were really the "spiritual father" of the young Fascists, even though you no longer wish to recognize your own children. But, "history shall tell us."

CROCE — Yes, history shall....!

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## INDEX OF AUTHORS

Aristotle, 23  
Augustine, Saint, 55  
Berkeley, G., 24  
Calderón, P., 47  
Cervantes, M., 63  
Croce, B., 7, 8  
Da Vinci, L., 50  
De Sanctis, F., 40, 48, 61  
Fiorentino, F., 72  
Gentile, G., 7, 8

Hegel, G., 13, 23, 26, 27, 65, 69  
Johnson, S., 24  
Marx, K., 14, 61, 65, 70  
Nietzsche, F., 21  
Pius XI, Pope, 56  
Protagoras, 38, 45  
Sorel, G., 70  
Spaventa, B., 11, 24, 25, 45  
Vico, G., 69





